



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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DROUGHT BRINGS GRIM OUTLOOK FOR NESTING DUCKS

With drought once again hitting the principal duck nesting areas of North America, U.S. and Canadian wildlife biologists are extremely concerned about the status of duck populations this year. In some regions, 1988 is another year of poor conditions that have persisted through most of this decade.

"The situation looks grim," said Frank Dunkle, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Habitat conditions are worse than last year. At this point, it appears unlikely that mallards, pintails, and other prairie-nesting ducks will have the good production year they need to build up their numbers."

If duck production is low as a result of the drought, Dunkle said, the Fish and Wildlife Service would be required to take a hard look at this year's waterfowl hunting regulations. He emphasized, however, that no decisions about hunting regulations will be made until complete information on habitat conditions and duck populations is available later this summer.

Aerial and ground surveys by U.S. and Canadian biologists and climate data from Canada indicate very dry conditions in much of the prime duck production area of the continent--the north-central prairie states and southern Canadian provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Grassland areas are the most affected and conditions there are the worst observed in many years. Parkland areas farther north offer some relief, but even there habitat conditions range from wet to dry.

Many areas experienced a mild, dry fall and winter followed by low precipitation and strong winds this spring. In southern Canada, poor conditions began as early as last summer when less than one-third of the prairie region received normal precipitation. A March snowstorm provided mostly short-term or localized relief. It is believed rainfall this late in the spring probably will not help much because the ground is so dry it will just soak up the water. Survey crews have observed topsoil piled against fences and in ditches on both sides of the border and extensive dust storms were common this spring in some regions.

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Little nesting cover is available in many areas because of poor growing conditions this spring and little cover remaining from last year. In southern Canada, the mild, dry fall and winter allowed cattle to graze in many areas not normally accessible, further reducing nesting cover. In some parts of southern Canada and the north-central United States, livestock owners are having to haul water to stock dams and dugouts to provide for their animals. Many wetland basins and their surrounding vegetation continue to be cleared, burned, and plowed as the dry conditions make them more accessible.

Many basins that normally retain water and provide good duck habitat are low or empty. One study in a 5-square-mile area around Woodworth, North Dakota, indicated that only 38 percent of the basins had water, and water levels in most of these were low. Old Wives Lake in southcentral Saskatchewan is dry for the first time since 1937, and other lakes in the region are dry, as well. Whitewater Lake in southwest Manitoba, traditionally an important area for ducks, is only a quarter full. In some cases, basins have residual water from previous years but there are few temporary or seasonal water areas. For example, temporary wetlands in northeast Montana are dry and only deeper basins have water.

Preliminary reports on duck distribution and abundance also reflect stressed habitat conditions, as biologists report congregations of ducks crowding into what water remains, often with little nesting cover.

This year's dry conditions will likely continue the 1980's trend of generally poor duck production. In 1985, duck breeding populations fell to the lowest level since surveys began in the 1950's, and numbers have not improved significantly since then. In 1987, breeding populations of 6 of the 10 major duck species (mallard, American wigeon, blue-winged teal, northern pintail, canvasback, and scaup) were significantly below their respective average population sizes for 1955-86.

Teams of U.S. and Canadian biologists survey prime duck nesting areas each spring to assess habitat conditions and estimate breeding duck populations. This information is used in establishing waterfowl hunting regulations for the following fall.